Report of the Billfish Species Working Group

Advisory Committee to the U.S. Section to ICCAT

May 17, 2021

Anna Beckwith, Convener

Bryan Keller, Rapporteur

The Billfish Species Working Group met on May 17, 2021 via Google Meets to develop recommendations regarding ICCAT's conservation, management, research, and data collection efforts for white marlin, blue marlin and sailfish. The Working Group reviewed its 2020 report and considered the results of the 2020 ICCAT correspondence process and recent work of ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS). The Billfish Species Working Group (WG) agreed on the following recommendations:

Management Recommendations:

1. The United States should continue collaboration with partners to build further support for mandatory use of circle hooks, including by elevating the issue within CPC governments, as appropriate, and seek adoption of an ICCAT requirement for the use of large circle hooks in pelagic longline fisheries given the significant reductions in billfish bycatch mortality associated with their use, which will support rebuilding of overfished stocks.

2. The United States should prioritize a thorough review of the billfish check sheet adopted as ICCAT Rec. 18-05. Specific compliance concerns include non-reporting of marlin discards, unacknowledged recreational fisheries, and lack of documented laws and regulations to implement Rec. 19-05. The WG notes that publicly available information could support this review. If a meaningful check sheet review process is not possible via correspondence in 2021, the United States should request inclusion of the issue on the 2022 Compliance Committee agenda.

3. The United States should support strengthened engagement with the Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission (WECAFC), including efforts to improve data collection and reporting throughout the Caribbean and to implement port State measures, which will help to support future stock assessments and address regional IUU fishing in coastal and high-seas fleets.

4. Noting that the limit for eastern Atlantic sailfish of 1,030 t was significantly exceeded in 2019 (with a reported 2,008 t), the 2020 reported catches should be reviewed when available. Any ongoing overharvests of serious magnitude should be highlighted as a concern needing future action by the Commission.

Research Recommendations:

1. Noting that many of the basic life-history parameters of billfish are still poorly understood, the WG recommends continued life history studies for white marlin, such as age and growth studies.

2. The WG has identified the need for improving information on billfish mortality associated with purse seine fisheries throughout the Atlantic and with commercial surface FAD fisheries in the Caribbean. The United States should encourage the SCRS to consider the effect of increasing numbers of moored and drifting FADs in the Western Atlantic on billfish CPUE estimates, particularly in commercial fisheries.

3. The United States should request an analysis by the ICCAT Secretariat comparing catch composition among fleets fishing in similar areas with similar gear types, as a means to identify potential unreported bycatch and incidental catches.

4. U.S. scientists should evaluate the impact on billfish stock assessment results of including vs. not including early period Japanese longline abundance indices.

5. Pursuant to Recommendation 19-05, the WG recommends that electronic tags continue to be deployed on billfish in order to collect important data, such as habitat utilization, movement ecology and post-release mortality, to be incorporated into habitat models. This work is pivotal for advancing and updating our understanding of how billfish may interact with various ICCAT fisheries.

Working Group Members:

Anna Beckwith (Convener)
Peter Chaibongsai
John Graves
Robert Navarro (absent)
Tim O'Brien
Jan McDowell
Raimundo Espinoza

Other Attendees:
Bryan Keller (Rapporteur)
Rachel O'Malley
Randy Blankinship
Craig Brown
Eric Orbesen
Michael Schirripa
Carrie Soltanoff
Deirdre Warner-Kramer

Commissioners:

Alexa Cole
Glenn Delaney
Ray Bogan